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Townsend Brings it Back Home: Filmmaker Goes on Location Near His Old West Side Haunts

When Robert Townsend was growing up in Chicago, there was a small, low-budget movie that changed his life. It was filmed near the hardscrabble West Side neighborhood where he lived, and it detailed the coming-of-age story of two neighborhood boys.

The movie was called "Cooley High" and it went on to influence a generation, inspiring TV shows ("What's Happen-in' "), music ("Cooleyhighharmony" by Boys II Men) and films ("Boyz N the Hood"). "Cooley High," released in 1975, also marked Townsend's acting debut: He had two lines.

Flash forward 32 years. A small, independent feature is being filmed in Garfield Park, two miles from Townsend's old West Side neighborhood. It focuses on the coming-of-age story of three neighborhood boys. It stars and is executive produced by Townsend, and it may change many lives.

"I've always wanted to come back, but studios make it difficult for small films to come to Chicago. Now it's changing [with new tax incentives], and it feels good to be home," Townsend says about "Of Boys and Men," his first Chicago-produced film. Perched on the stoop of one of the bungalows lining the quiet block where the movie is set, in overcoat and mustache, Townsend, 50, looks the part of film mogul. A legendary comedian, actor, director, writer and producer -- as well as CEO of the Black Family Channel -- Townsend has traveled eons from the impish comic who first made his mark in Hollywood with 1987's "Hollywood Shuffle." But not so far that he has forgotten where he came from and what it takes to help others reach the same heights.

"People want to know how movies are made, and my ultimate mission is about empowerment. It's one thing to make a movie, it's another to train 50 people about every aspect of filmmaking," he says. Indeed, "Of Boys and Men" boasts a shadow training program where local hopefuls get to learn film skills. "If they want to learn about producing, directing or hair and makeup, it's all here."

Kevin Anderson is a 22-year-old actor who grabbed the chance to learn filmmaking with the shadow training program.

"I've learned the producing side; being able to budget a film, keeping everything on schedule," Anderson says. "I've seen how time is money and how important professionalism is on set."

Anderson, who has acted for four years in short films and as an extra in the "Prison Break" TV series, sees Townsend as a powerful role model: "I look up to people like Robert. I want to be able to do all of it just like he does -- write, produce, act, direct, all of it. I want to be a renaissance man."

Shot entirely on the West Side, "Of Boys and Men" captures the struggles of a family during emotional hardships as well as the choices made by neighborhood boys growing into manhood. The movie, due out in January 2008, also stars Angela Bassett as Townsend's wife, who gets killed in a car accident. Victoria Rowell of "The Young and the Restless" and "Diagnosis Murder" fame plays Townsend's sister who helps him through the tragedy, and Faizon Love of the recent movies "Elf," "Blue Crush" and "Idlewild" plays a hustler who tempts the neighborhood boys with a shady lifestyle.

"To see movie stars walking down your block shows another reality," Townsend says. "The other week Angela Bassett was walking down the block; another week Faizon Love was here. There's a certain pride and respect that people get from that. I've gotten to know the people on the block, and it's like, 'Hey Robert, we shootin' tonight?' "

There's an air of a neighborhood block party to the set, and Townsend greets the residents, most of whom are extras, enthusiastically. Besides the four Hollywood actors, the movie is almost a totally homegrown production, with screenwriter Michele Amor, director Carl Seaton, executive producers Shebeta Carter and Maisha Parsons and the three young lead actors all hailing from Chicago. Producer Pemon Rami possesses an especially significant Chicago connection.

"I did the casting for 'Cooley High.' Robert did his very first production with me," Rami says. "I cast him in his first commercial, his first play; we've worked together for a long time."

A Chicago native who has also cast such classic Chicago films as "The Blues Brothers" and "Mahogany" (with Townsend as an extra), Rami says he's also glad to be home.

Strolling down the sidewalk, Townsend grins as 12-year-old Scott Baity, who plays neighborhood boy Deshon, walks up. "I've nicknamed him 'Baby James Earl Jones'; he really knows how to draw the emotion out," he says as he encircles Baity's shoulders. "He's the next generation and he's making it happen."